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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes research in the affective and social realms that overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools. Findings on the affective and social effects of school size are extensive and highly consistent, while the research base on outcomes of schools-within-a-school arrangements is smaller and less conclusive. While many small schools are also rural, it is the smallness of schools, regardless of setting, that is beneficial to students. Research on feelings and attitudes indicates the superiority of small schools in the following areas: student attitudes toward school in general and particular subjects, personal and academic self-concepts of students, student sense of belonging, social bonding between teachers and students, teacher and administrator attitudes toward work and each other, and cooperation among colleagues. Research on social behavior shows that compared to large schools, small schools have higher student rates of extracurricular participation, higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates, and fewer behavior and discipline problems. Small schools' superior performance may be related to the need for everyone's involvement, better interpersonal relationships, and easier management of individualized and cooperative practices. Economically disadvantaged and minority students benefit most from small schools, but are frequently concentrated in large schools in large districts. Schools-within-a-school plans have potential for producing results like those of small schools provided they are distinct administrative entities within the buildings that house them. Contains 13 references. (SV)

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by Kathleen Cotton

The school consolidation trend that began early in this century continues into the present, with both schools and districts becoming fewer in number and larger in size (Howley, 1994; Walberg, 1992). Today, high school enrollments of 2,000 and 3,000 are commonplace, and New York City has many schools with enrollments approaching 5,000.

Meanwhile, decades of research show that student achievement in small schools is at least equal—and often superior—to achievement in large schools (Fowler, 1995; Howley, 1994). Moreover, although it is often assumed that large schools are cheaper to operate and provide richer curricula than small schools, studies show that neither of these things is necessarily true (Gregory, 1992). In addition, a large body of research in the affective and social realms overwhelmingly affirms the superiority of small schools. This Digest describes that research.

Introduction

While there is no universal agreement about the numerical limits of small and large schools, "on average, the research indicates that an effective size for an elementary school is in the range of 300-400 students and that 400-800 students is appropriate for a secondary school" (Williams 1990, pp. 7-8). These figures should be regarded as pushing the upper limits, since many investigators conclude that *no* school should have more than 400 or 500 students.

Cotton (1996) noted several other characteristics of the research on school size:

- Research on the affective and social effects of school size is extensive and highly consistent in its findings. Thus, assertions about these effects are offered with a high degree of confidence.
- The research base on the outcomes of school-within-a-school arrangements is smaller and less conclusive. Assertions about them must therefore be regarded as somewhat tentative.
- Since many small schools are in rural areas, some researchers have designed studies to find out whether it is the smallness or the ruralness of these schools that accounts for their positive effects. These studies reveal that it is the *smallness* of schools, regardless of setting, that is beneficial to students.

Research on Feelings and Attitudes

Student attitudes. Considerable effort has gone into studying the relative effects of large and small schools on student attitudes toward school in general and toward particular school subjects. This research overwhelmingly favors small schools (Fowler, 1995; Howley, 1994; Rutter, 1988). In addition, compared to students in large schools, both the personal and the academic *self-concepts* of students in small schools are more positive (Rutter, 1988; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992).

Sense of belonging. Research reveals that, compared to students in large schools, those in small schools experience a much greater sense of belonging—sometimes expressed as a lower level of alienation (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Gregory, 1992; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). Closely related to this finding is the higher quality of *interpersonal relations* found in small schools (Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Rutter, 1988). Rutter is representative in citing "evidence of increases in social bonding to teachers and school, self-esteem, academic self-concept, locus of control, and sociocentric reasoning" (p. 31).

Administrator and teacher attitudes. While less school size research has concentrated on teachers and administrators than on students, what findings there are favor small schools (Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory, 1992; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). These studies focused on administrator attitudes toward work; teacher attitudes toward work, administration, and one another; and incidences of cooperation and collaboration among colleagues. Gottfredson (1985) notes that "large schools appear to promote negative teacher perceptions of school administration and low staff morale" (p. 39).

Research on Social Behavior

Extracurricular participation. Students participate in extracurricular activities at significantly higher levels in small schools than in large ones (Cotton, 1996; Fowler, 1995; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). Students in small schools are also more likely to participate in a greater variety of activities and to hold important positions in the activities in which they are involved. Researchers point out that, in small schools, everyone is needed to populate teams, offices, and clubs; thus, even shy and less able students are encouraged to participate and made to feel they belong. As schools grow larger, opportunities for participation also grow—*but not proportionately*: a twentyfold increase in population produces only a fivefold increase in participation opportunities. Thus, in large schools, a greater proportion of students do not participate in extracurricular activities, because they are not needed to fill the available participation slots.

Attendance and dropouts. Not only do students in small schools have higher attendance rates than those in large schools, but students who move from large schools to small, alternative secondary schools generally exhibit improvements in attendance (Fowler, 1995; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Rutter, 1988). Regarding dropouts, the holding power of small schools is considerably greater than that of large schools.

Social disruption. "Behavior problems are so much greater in larger schools," report Stockard & Mayberry (1992, p. 47), "that any possible virtue of larger size is canceled out by the difficulties of maintaining an orderly learning environment." Studies on social disruption have investigated everything from truancy and classroom disor-

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der to vandalism, aggressive behavior, theft, substance abuse, and gang participation. This social research all points to the same conclusion: Small schools have far fewer behavior problems than large schools (Gottfredson, 1985; Gregory, 1992; Rutter, 1988).

Why Smaller is Better

Educators, researchers, and survey responses received from teachers, students, and parents suggest several reasons for the superior performance of small schools. Cotton's 1996 synthesis of 103 studies and reviews describes a number of these underlying conditions. For example, the need, in small schools, for everyone's involvement in school activities appears to be related to other social and affective areas. People in small schools come to know and care about one another to a greater degree than is possible in large schools, and rates of parent involvement are higher. Staff and students are found to have a stronger sense of personal efficacy. Small-school students tend to take more of the responsibility for their own learning, learning activities are more likely to be individualized, classes are typically smaller, and scheduling is much more flexible.

Many practices common in small schools are in operation largely because they are much easier to implement and manage in small environments than in large ones. Looking at instructional practices in small schools, researchers find that teachers are more likely to form teaching teams, integrate their subject-matter content, employ multiage grouping and cooperative learning, and use performance assessments. Finally, small schools tend to exhibit greater emphasis on learning that is experiential and relevant to the world outside of school.

School Size and Educational Equity

We know that the states with the largest schools and school districts have the worst achievement, affective, and social outcomes (Jewel, 1989; Walberg, 1992). We also know that the students who stand to benefit most from small schools are economically disadvantaged and minority students. To put it another way, these students experience the greatest amount of harm from attending large schools (Cotton, 1996; Fowler, 1995; Howley, 1994; Lee & Smith, 1996). Yet, these are the very students who are primarily concentrated in large schools within large school districts (Jewell, 1989; Lee & Smith, 1996). Jewell writes,

> If minority students must struggle more to achieve a solid public education and if large districts and large schools find it increasingly difficult to achieve solid educational results for their students, we may be acting contrary to the interests of all concerned by organizing our public education system in a manner which assigns high proportions of minority youngsters to large schools within very large school districts. (p. 152)

School-Within-a-School Plans

In an attempt to reap at least some of the benefits of small schools, some educators and parent groups have launched school-within-a-school arrangements, in which large schools are divided into two or more subunits. In *vertical house plans*, students in grades 9-12 or 10-12 are assigned to groups of a few hundred each within a large high school. In *ninth grade house plans*, the ninth graders in large high schools have their own "house" with various support services to ease the transition into high school. In *special curriculum schools*, students are organized into houses based on special interests or needs. In *charter schools*, groups of parents and/or teachers spearhead efforts to provide a special curriculum focus for which they have recognized a need. And there are other school-within-a-school variations.

A growing body of research suggests that school-within-a-school plans have potential for producing results like those associated with small schools *provided they are distinct administrative entities* within the buildings that house them. "The major challenge to schools within schools," writes Mary Ann Raywid, "has been obtaining sufficient separateness and autonomy to permit staff members to generate a distinctive environment and to carry out their own vision of schooling" (1985, p. 455).

Conclusion

Although the professional literature supports educating children in small schools, the consolidation trend continues to create large schools. This is because factors other than student results—political, economic, social, and demographic factors—typically drive decisions about school size. While such a trend would be difficult to reverse, the research indicates that it would be well worth the effort.

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